The Northern Ireland agreement: an explication of a political milestone

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The Northern Ireland Agreement: An Explication of a Political Milestone [1]

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Zusammenfassung

Am Karfreitag, den 10. April 1998 wurde das Nordirlandabkommen von allen politischen Parteien Nordirlands unterzeichnet. Sowohl von den politischen Kommentatoren und politischen Beobachtern wurde das Hauptziel des Abkommens, das Unvereinbare zu vereinbaren, als eine bedeutende Errungenschaft angesehen, nämlich die beiden religiösen Gemeinschaften in Nordirland, die Protestanten und Katholiken, die Unionisten und Nationalisten, die Loyalisten und die Republikaner in einem gerechten und dauerhaften Abkommen, das die unterschiedlichen Traditionen respektiert, zusammenzubringen. In welchem Ausmaß wurde dieses Ziel erreicht? Um eine Antwort auf diese Frage zu finden und ein Verständnis davon zu vermitteln, wie das Abkommen versucht, einen akzeptablen politischen Kompromiß für beide religiösen Gruppen zu finden, richtet sich dieser Artikel auf die folgenden drei Streitfragen: Zunächst werden Hintergrundinformationen im Sinne von aktuellen sozialen und politischen Beziehungen zwischen den beiden religiösen Traditionen präsentiert. Es folgt ein kurzer historischer Überblick über die Intensität und das Ausmaß des Konfliktes, wie auch sein Einfluß auf die laufenden demokratischen Entscheidungen in dieser Provinz. Schließlich werden die eigentlichen Bedingungen des Abkommens, seine öffentliche Akzeptierbarkeit unter den beiden religiösen Gruppen ebenso wie die Chancen für einen friedlichen und andauernden Ausgleich in Nordirland geprüft.

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Abstract

On Good Friday, the 10th April 1998, the Northern Ireland Agreement was formally endorsed by all the major political parties in Northern Ireland. Considered a landmark achievement by both political analysts and commentators alike, the primary purpose of the agreement was to reconcile the irreconcilable; to bring together the two religious communities of Northern Ireland, Protestant and Catholic, Unionist and Nationalist, Loyalist and Republican, in an equitable and lasting accommodation that would respect their differing traditions and heritage. To what extent was this objective met? To answer this question and to provide an understanding of how the agreement sought to find a political compromise acceptable to both religious communities, this article addresses the agreement in terms of the following three issues. First, some background information in terms of the current social and political relations between the two religious traditions in Northern Ireland is presented. This is followed by a brief historical overview of the scale and intensity of the conflict as well as its impact for current democratic governance within the province. Finally, the actual terms of the agreement, its public acceptability among the two religious communities, as well as its chances of achieving a peaceful and lasting settlement within Northern Ireland are examined.

Introduction

After much political drama and extensive media hype, on Good Friday, the 10th April 1998, the Northern Ireland Agreement was formally endorsed by all the major political parties in Northern Ireland. For the first time in Northern Ireland`s long and troubled history, political representatives from both communities - Protestant and Catholic, Unionist and Nationalist, Loyalist and Republican - came together to achieve what must be considered, by any standards, the completion of one of the most difficult but eventually successful negotiations undertaken in this society. United in a common purpose to end the violence and to find a political compromise acceptable to both religious communities, the primary aim of the participants to the agreement was to reconcile the irreconcilable. Above all else, the agreement was a finely-tuned endeavour aimed at satisfying both the differing traditions and aspirations of the two religious communities within Northern Ireland and in doing so, hopefully, to pave the way for democratic governance.

The achievement of this attempted balance was not without controversy, however. No sooner had the agreement been endorsed but an avalanche of criticism was hurled at the participants from all sides. While some political commentators from both sides of the two religious traditions castigated it as a negation of their national traditions and heritage, other, more muted, criticisms stressed the one-sided nature of the agreement in terms of

either a unionist or nationalist advantage. Still other, more vocal commentators, lambasted the agreement as a death knell for democracy and characterised it as nothing more than a sell-out to terrorists, more notably the paramilitary organisations, such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA), on the Catholic or nationalist side. To what extent are these differing interpretations correct? For example, was the Northern Ireland Agreement, in fact, a sell-out to republican terrorists as some Unionist commentators, most notably ***Ian Paisley***, have suggested? Alternatively, to what extent do claims concerning the one-sided nature of the agreement, either in terms of its perceived greater accommodation to either unionist or nationalist aspirations, hold up?

To answer these questions and to provide an understanding of how this agreement sought to achieve a balanced compromise in terms of the differing traditions and aspirations of the two religious communities within Northern Ireland, this article will address the agreement in terms of the following three issues. First, background information in terms of the current social and political relations between the two religious traditions in Northern Ireland is presented. Second, this will be followed by a brief overview of the scale and intensity of the conflict as well as its impact on democratic governance within the province. Finally, the actual terms of the agreement, both in terms of its particular details, its perceived advantages and disadvantages for each of the two religious communities, as well as its chances of achieving a peaceful and lasting political settlement within Northern Ireland is addressed.

Religion, Community Relations and Political Identity

The Northern Irish conflict has traditionally been characterised as a sectarian conflict between two monolithic religious communities, Protestant and Catholic. Although this view has been disputed over the past quarter of century, mainly by Marxists, few social scientists question the basic proposition that the major divide, or the principal source of identity in Northern Ireland, is religious affiliation (see ***Whyte***, 1990, for a review of this literature). Empirical research confirms this proposition (see Table 1). In every census conducted up to 1981, more than nine out of ten residents of Northern Ireland identified either with the Catholic Church or one of the Protestant denominations. In the 1951 census alone, 99.4 per cent of the population fell into these two categories. Although this figure had fallen by 1991, or the most recent census, approximately 85 per cent of the total population still explicitly claim either a Catholic or Protestant religious affiliation. Furthermore, the proportion of individuals who claim a Catholic religious affiliation has grown significantly over the last two decades. Currently, 38.4 per cent of the Northern Ireland population identify themselves as Roman Catholic as compared to 45.6 per cent for their Protestant counterparts.

Table 1: Religious Identification in Northern Ireland, 1961-1991

	Year of Census			
Religious affiliation	1961	1971	1981	1991
Protestant	60.4	55.6	48.4	45.6
Catholic	34.9	31.4	28.0	38.4
Other	2.7	3.6	5.1	5.0
Not Stated	2.0	9.4	18.5	7.3
No religion	---	---	---	3.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
(N)	(1,425,042)	(1,519,640)	(1,481,959)	(1,577,836)

Note: In the 1991 census, a separate category was introduced which allowed individuals to explicitly identify themselves as having no religious affiliation, or the people whom sociologists of religion have traditionally referred to as "Nones".
Source: Northern Ireland Census, 1961, 1971, 1981 and 1991.

More importantly, however, these religious divisions are not merely nominal but extend to all areas of political and social life within the province. Northern Ireland is an extremely religiously segregated society (see ***Curtice*** and ***Gallagher***, 1990). The two communities are educated separately, are segregated both residentially and in their places of work, and display very low rates of intermarriage. For example, recent estimates from the Social Identity in Northern Ireland Survey undertaken by ***Karen Trew*** at Queen's University of Belfast suggests that only about one in six of the adult population has attended a school where there are pupils of the other religion, a proportion that has remained constant over the past thirty years or so, and that the vast majority claim that all of most of their relatives and neighbours, 85 and 66 per cent respectively, are of the same religion as themselves. Added to this separation are inequalities in life chances. Protestants are, on average, better educated and more affluent than Catholics and are substantially less likely to be unemployed, despite the passage of a series of anti-discrimination laws since the late 1970s (***Smith*** and ***Chambers***, 1991).

However, more so than any other factor, it is disagreement about political identity and the preferred constitutional position of Northern Ireland that separates the two communities. Here preferences are polarised around two competing ideologies: Unionism - support for the retention of the union between Northern Ireland and Great Britain - and, Nationalism - support for a united Ireland. It is these deeply felt and mutually exclusive ideologies that have given Northern Irish politics its distinctive and violent nature. The conflict is further heightened in that this political cleavage coincides to a considerable extent with a religious division (see Table 2). In other words, not only do the vast majority of Protestants (75 per cent) perceive themselves as Unionists, but they are also overwhelming in their support for the maintenance of the Union with Britain (88 per cent).

Table 2: Religious Differences in Political Identity and Constitutional Preferences, 1995

	(Percentages)	
	Protestant	Catholic
Political Identity:		
Unionist	75	0
Neither	25	49
Nationalist	0	51
(N)	(730)	(564)
Constitutional Preferences:		
Remain part of UK	88	34
Reunify Ireland	6	56
Other Option	2	3
Don't know	4	6
Not answered	0	1
(N)	(354)	(290)

Source: Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey, 1995.

This uniformity in political identities and constitutional preferences is not as stark within the Catholic community. Nevertheless, Table 2 shows that just over half of all Catholics (51 per cent) see themselves as Nationalists, and a majority (56 per cent) favours a united Ireland. More importantly, however, whereas no Catholic sees him or herself in terms of a Unionist identity, the reverse is true in terms of a Nationalist identity for Protestants. Furthermore, a review of past survey evidence suggests that in contrast to the stability in Protestant views which have never deviated more than three percentage points since the late 1980s, the amount of Catholics who wish to remain within the United Kingdom has fluctuated considerably in the last few years decreasing from 36 per cent in 1993 to just 24 per cent in 1994, only to rise again to 34 per cent in 1995 (***Breen***, 1996).

This sectarian division is further reflected in the political party structure (see Table 3). For example, not only do the overwhelmingly majority of Protestants support the two main Unionist Parties (the Democratic Unionist Party [DUP] led by ***Ian Paisley*** and the Ulster Unionist Party [UUP] led by ***David Trimble***) but Catholics almost exclusively divide their support between the two main nationalist parties (the Social Democratic Labour Party [SDLP] led by ***John Hume*** and Sinn Fein [SF] led by ***Gerry Adams***). Furthermore, whereas no Catholic supports either of the two main unionist parties (DUP and UUP) only 1 per cent of Protestants support Nationalist parties, in this case the more moderate SDLP. Also, although both Protestants and Catholics support the one avowedly non-sectarian party, the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland [APNI] led by ***John Alderdice***, in both cases the level of support it attracts is extremely modest, and it has constantly failed to capture enough votes to win a parliamentary seat at Westminster.

Table 3: Religious Differences in Party Preferences, 1995

	(Percentages)	
	Protestant	Catholic
Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)	19	0
Ulster Unionist Party (UUP)	53	0
Alliance Party Northern Ireland (APNI)	11	9
Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP)	1	60
Sinn Fein (SF)	0	7
No Party	16	24
(N)	(658)	(507)

Note: The parties are arranged in descending order from the most extreme Unionist parties (DUP) to the most extreme Nationalist parties (SF).
Source: Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey, 1995.

In summary, then, Northern Ireland is a deeply divided society. Not only are the two religious communities segregated both geographically and socially, but for the overwhelming majority of the population their political identities and their religious affiliation are almost coterminous. The society is also divided on a range of social factors, all of which reinforce the sectarian divide. As we noted above, there is little or no integration between the communities in education, with the exception of university education; intermarriage is rare and when it occurs, the couple often choose to live outside Northern Ireland; and there is a strong pattern of residential segregation, particularly in the working class areas of Belfast and the other major towns. The net effect is a religion division which is reinforced by divisions within the society as a whole, which are recreated from generation to generation.

Exposure to Political Violence

Accompanying these high levels of religious segregation and political division, Northern Ireland has also experienced a long and sustained period of political violence. By any standards, the exposure of Northern Ireland society to political violence has been massive. For example, since the start of the current Troubles in 1967, there has been: 3,172 deaths (70 per cent of which have been civilian); 24,024 civilian injuries; 35,059 shooting incidents; 14,884 bomb explosions; and 16,365 individuals charged with terrorist offences (see Table 4).

In a population of just over 1.5 million people, the scale and the intensity of the violence put it on the level of a war. If we were to extrapolate the scale of the violence to Britain, with a population of over 57 million, we would find somewhere in the region of 119,000 deaths, one million civilian injuries and 1,315,000 shooting instances. In the United States, the same level of violence would result in just over half a million deaths and close to four

Table 4: The Scale of the Political Violence in Northern Ireland, 1967-1995

	Northern Ireland	Great Britain	United States
Deaths	3,172	119,000	515,000
Civilian injuries	24,024	1,000,000	3,904,000
Shooting incidents	35,059	1,315,000	5,697,000
Bomb explosions	14,884	558,000	2,419,000
Persons charged with terrorist offences	16,365	614,000	2,659,000

Source: ***Bairner***, 1996, pp. 168-171.

million injuries. By any standards, whether in terms of the general loss of life or the extent of civilian casualties, both the level and intensity of the communal violence in Northern Ireland must be considered more like a war than a minor conflict.

It is hardly surprising, then, that substantial numbers of people in Northern Ireland have had significant exposure to various aspects of the violence (see Table 5). The most recently available survey evidence shows that whereas 16 per cent of Protestants and 26 per cent of Catholics claim that they have been caught up in a riot, almost double these numbers - 28 per cent of Protestants and 48 per cent of Catholics - have had some direct exposure to violence. When indirect exposure to the violence is considered, the numbers climb even further, with about two-thirds of individuals within both communities been affected in terms of claiming knowledge of the death or injury of someone they know.

Table 5: Exposure to Political Violence in Northern Ireland, 1995

	(Percentages)	
	Protestant	Catholic
Caught up in Riot	16	26
Direct Exposure		
Intimidated	13	29
House searched	3	24
Family member killed or injured	17	22
Victim, uninjured	5	6
Victim, injured	4	6
[At least one]	[28]	[48]
Indirect Exposure		
Know someone killed	60	63
Know someone injured	56	57
[At least one]	[68]	[69]
(N)	(576)	(366)

Source: Social Identity in Northern Ireland Survey, 1995

There are also some notable differences between the two religious communities in their exposure to different types and intensities of political violence. For example, not only do a significantly higher proportion of Catholics than Protestants claim to have experienced the violence first-hand in terms of their exposure to rioting behaviour, but an even more pronounced differential emerges when a range of other direct violent measures such as self-reported intimidation and house searches are considered. This is not the case when either injury or the loss of life is considered; here, both communities have borne an equal share of the ultimate human cost in terms of Northern Ireland's long and violent history.

The Absence of Democratic Governance

Northern Ireland has never been a competitive democracy in the conventional sense. From the partition of Ireland in 1920 until the suspension of the Stormont parliament in 1972, formal democratic institutions were maintained in terms of a devolved parliament. But the province was not a competitive democracy in the conventional sense, since there was no possibility that the Protestant and unionist majority would ever lose an election, nor that the Catholic and nationalist opposition could ever win. It was a hegemonic state in which one community (Protestant) enjoyed permanent government, while the other community (Catholic) was consigned to permanent political opposition (***O'Leary*** and ***Arthur***, 1990).

Since the introduction of direct rule from Britain in 1972, even limited local democracy has been withdrawn, with the partial (and extremely short-lived) exceptions of the 1973 Assembly and the 1982 Assembly, both of which failed in their goal of re-establishing devolution because of Protestant opposition to power-sharing with their Catholic counterparts. This has had the effect of creating what has been called a democratic deficit, since Northern Ireland affairs are rarely debated at the Westminster parliament in London, and since local government (following its reform in 1973) has few substantive powers. The consequence has been to stifle political debate in Northern Ireland, and to ensure that talented potential political leaders must go elsewhere to follow their ambition.

The legacy of political violence and non-democratic governance is evident in terms of the lack of public support for democratic values in Northern Ireland. The vast majority of people in Northern Ireland have little faith in the democratic process. Recent survey evidence demonstrates that popular support for political efficacy and trust, two of the central concepts in contemporary theories of political participation and democratic politics, is extremely low within this society (***Hayes*** and ***McAllister***, 1996). Irrespective of whether Protestants or Catholics are considered, not only do the vast majority of Northern Ireland citizens express an extremely negative opinion in terms of the responsiveness of their political representatives, but a widespread feeling of alienation and a sense of powerlessness as to how the political system works is by far the most dominant view.

Similar results emerge when political trust, or attitudes concerning the trustworthiness of elected politicians, civil servants and the police force, are considered, although, in this case, significant differences also emerge between Protestants and Catholics in relation to the issue. As a group, Protestants are notably more trusting of these political institutions than Catholics; the average level of trust was 37 per cent among Protestants, but only 19 per cent among Catholics. While an explanation for this religious difference can be found in terms of the consistently more negative views expressed by Catholics concerning the trustworthiness of these political institutions, more so that any other factor, however, it is differences in relation to their attitudes towards the police that set Protestants and Catholics apart on this issue. In contrast to nearly two-thirds of Protestants who believe that the police would not bend the rules to secure a conviction, only just over one quarter of Catholics share this view.

Contrary to other western established democracies, Northern Ireland has never been a truly democratic society in the conventional meaning of the word. Decades of political instability and intransigence, heightened by a seemingly endless stream of violence and death, has done little to negate this political vacuum. Popular democratic values, the underpinnings of any effective set of democratic institutions, are weak and under-developed. It was in the context of these historically-derived circumstances of a bitterly divided and politically disillusioned people that the Good Friday agreement was formally endorsed on 10 April 1998.

The Northern Ireland Agreement

The current peace process has its roots in the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement. The Anglo-Irish Agreement established the principle that the government of the Irish Republic had a legitimate role to play in Northern Ireland affairs (see ***O'Leary*** and ***McGarry***, 1993). It was agreed to by the British conservative prime minister ***Margaret Thatcher*** who had reached the conclusion that only extensive collaboration with the government of the Irish Republic would improve the security situation in Northern Ireland. Her assessment of the situation followed the hunger strikes staged by IRA prisoners in 1981-82, during which 10 died, and the bombing of the Grand Hotel in Brighton in 1984, which narrowly missed killing her and other cabinet members. The Anglo-Irish Agreement was opposed by both the Ulster unionists and Irish republicans and it had no direct consequences for establishing democratic institutions in Northern Ireland.

During the 1980s the IRA had also begun to reassess its position (see ***McIntyre***, 1995). Irish republicans had always maintained that the key to a resolution of the Northern Ireland problem was Britain's continuing presence in Ireland; if Britain indicated its intention to leave Northern Ireland, republicans argued that the Protestant majority would seek common cause with their Catholic neighbours and realise their true Irish heritage and identity. By the late 1980s, two factors had made this position untenable. First, despite discussion of

military and political withdrawal in the mid-1970s, the British government had taken the decision that withdrawal would create more instability and violence than continuing their presence in the province. Britain would therefore remain and try to maintain ‘an acceptable level of violence’. Second, the military efforts of the IRA had failed to secure a British withdrawal, and were unlikely to do so in the future. A new republican strategy to achieve Irish unity was therefore imperative.

This new IRA strategy emerged as ‘the ballot box in one hand and the armalite in the other’, the latter a reference to a rifle favoured by the IRA. Following the IRA hunger strikes and consequent Sinn Fein electoral successes of the early 1980s, the possibility that the IRA/Sinn Fein might replace the SDLP as the electoral representative of the Catholic community appeared feasible for the first time. Such a strategy had the potential to achieve Irish unity by constitutional methods, rather than by extra-constitutional physical force. Several new factors fostered this strategy. First, there had been a generational turnover within the IRA/Sinn Fein leadership; younger, more flexible leaders such as ***Gerry Adams*** and ***Martin McGuinness*** replaced the republican activists of the 1960s and 1970s who saw political change exclusively in terms of physical force. Second, ***John Hume***, the leader of the SDLP, had entered into a dialogue with ***Gerry Adams*** and kept the British government informed of their progress. While ***Hume*** remained a trenchant critic of violence and encountered considerable opposition within his own party for talking to ***Adams***, he remained in regular contact with him throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s.

All of these events culminated in the Downing Street Declaration of 15 December 1993, when the British and Irish governments agreed on a set of principles which would guide their future approach to the Ulster problem. The key part of the declaration was the recognition that Britain had no vested interest in Northern Ireland, and that it was for the people of Ireland themselves to exercise their right of self-determination. But Ulster unionist and British government demands for decommissioning of arms as a prior step before the start of formal talks initially stalled the peace process. The talks eventually commenced in January 1996, under auspices of a former member of the US Senate, ***George Mitchell***, but it was not until the election of the **Blair** Labour government in May 1997, which deliberately blurred the decommissioning issue, that progress began to be made. The talks finally concluded with an agreement on 10 April 1998.

The April 1998 Peace Agreement is based on the principle of parity of esteem: that is, the recognition of the political rights of both Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, and the right to express those rights in political institutions. This principle formed much of the basis of agreement in the Hume-Adams talks. The Agreement has three strands. Strand one involves the creation of an elected assembly in Northern Ireland with a powersharing executive; decisions of the assembly require a majority of both unionists and nationalist before they can be passed. The second strand creates a North-South ministerial council to

bring together ministers from the Irish Republic and Northern Ireland. Strand three creates a British-Irish Council bringing together representatives from all parts of the United Kingdom, including Scotland, Wales, and England, as well as both parts of Ireland. Other parts of the agreement stipulate total decommissioning of weapons within two years of the referendums, the release of paramilitary prisoners, and an inquiry into policing in Northern Ireland.

A crucial part of the Agreement was ratification by the citizens of both parts of Ireland. The two referendums to seek public endorsement for the Peace Agreement were held on 22 May 1998 (Table 6). There was little doubt that the Agreement would win overwhelming support in the Irish Republic and among Ulster Catholics, but the reaction of Ulster Protestants was much more uncertain. The largest party, the Ulster Unionist Party, was split on the issue, with its new leader, ***David Trimble***, supporting the Agreement but encountering trenchant opposition from many of his senior colleagues. The second largest Protestant party, the Democratic Unionists led by ***Ian Paisley***, opposed the Agreement on the grounds that it would undermine the Protestant community's position within the United Kingdom. Just one week prior to the referendum in Northern Ireland, opinion polls were showing that the Protestant community was deeply split on the issue, with a large number of undecided voters.

Table 6: The Result of the Referendums, 22 May 1998

	Northern Ireland		Irish Republic	
	N	Percent	N	Percent
Yes	676,966	71.1	1,442,583	94.4
No	274,879	28.9	85,748	5.6
Total valid votes	951,845	100.0	1,528,331	100.0
Spoiled votes	1,738		17,064	
(Turnout)		(81.1)		(56.3)

Note: In Northern Ireland, the question was: 'Do you support the agreement reached in the multi-party talks on Northern Ireland and set out in Command Paper 3883?; in the Irish Republic: 'Do you approve of the proposal to amend the Constitution contained in the undermentioned Bill, the Nineteenth Amendment of the Constitution Bill, 1998?' Source: http://www.irish-times.com/irish-times/special/peace

In the event, as Table 6 shows, around seven out of every 10 voters supported the Agreement, compared to 94 percent of voters in the Irish Republic. The turnout in Northern Ireland was a very substantial 81 percent, compared to 68 percent in the 1997 Westminster election and 65 percent in the 1996 Forum elections. However, turnout in the Irish Republic was just 56 percent, low by the standards of other referendums and partly a consequence of the referendum being held alongside a referendum on the European Union's Amsterdam agreement, about which the major parties disagreed. The lack of agreement between the parties on the Amsterdam agreement clearly depressed the turnout. Spoiled votes - a traditional mechanism for demonstrating protest - were insignificant in Northern Ireland, but amounted to 1.1 percent of all votes cast in the Irish Republic, and reflect a

republican protest against the south's abandonment of its historical territorial claim over Northern Ireland, one of the key principles of the Agreement.

The split within the Protestant community on the Agreement is clearly demonstrated by the results of an exit poll conducted on polling day in Northern Ireland (**Table 7**). While almost all of the Catholic respondents voted 'yes' to the Agreement, Protestants voting in favour exceeded those voting 'no' by just 2 percent. In terms of voting intention, three quarters of Ulster Unionists voted in favour of the Agreement, compared to just 11 percent of Democratic Unionists. The narrow Protestant majority in favour of the Agreement and the size of the group opposed to it is a major concern. This fundamental division within the Protestant community and the size of the anti-Agreement group does not bode well for the future of the Agreement.

Table 7: Referendum Vote, Voting Intention and Religion

	Yes	No	(N)
All	73	27	(1,677)
Voting intention			
Ulster Unionist Party	75	25	(311)
Democratic Unionist Party	11	89	(207)
Alliance Party	96	4	(137)
SDLP	99	1	(447)
Sinn Fein	98	2	(105)
Religion			
Protestant	51	49	(798)
Catholic	99	1	(715)

Source: Irish Times/Radio Televis Eireann Exit Poll, Friday 22nd May 1998.

With the Agreement ratified by the two electorates, the next stage was to elect an assembly, from which an executive would be drawn representing both communities. These elections were held on 25 June 1998 using the single transferable vote method of proportional representation, based on the 18 parliamentary constituencies used for elections to the Westminster parliament. The party with the largest number of first preference votes was the SDLP, but after transfers, the Ulster Unionist Party emerged with the largest number of seats, 28 of the 108 seats, compared to 24 for the SDLP (see **Table 8**). Sinn Fein attracted 17.7 percent of the vote and won 18 seats, their largest vote to date. In practice, the SDLP now attracts about 55 percent of the Catholic nationalist vote, Sinn Fein 45 percent. The Assembly elections confirm that Northern Ireland is now a four party system, with two Protestant and two Catholic parties attracting eight out of every 10 votes, and occupying 90 of the 108 seats in the Assembly. In each community, the larger of the two parties is the more moderate.

Table 8: The Result of the Assembly Elections, 25 June 1998

	Votes		
	N	Percent	Seats
SDLP	177,963	22.0	24
Ulster Unionist Party	172,225	21.3	28
Democratic Unionist Party	145,917	18.0	20
Sinn Fein	142,858	17.7	18
Alliance	52,636	6.5	6
UK Unionist Party	36,541	4.5	5
Progressive Unionist Party	20,634	2.5	2
Women's Coalition	13,019	1.6	2
Ulster Democratic Party	8,651	1.1	0
Labour	2,729	0.3	0
Others	36,090	4.5	3
Total valid votes	809,263	100.0	108
		(Turnout 70.5)	

Note: Votes are first preference votes. The allocation of seats is based on transfers between the parties using the single transferable vote method of proportional representation, based on 18 constituencies.
Source: http://explorers.whyte.com

Conclusion

Few societies have such deep and abiding divisions as Northern Ireland. What makes Northern Ireland unique is the range of social divisions, and the way in which they reinforce one another and shape political identity. The educational system, patterns of residence, social networks, marriage and much of the labour force remain segregated by religion. Major social groups, which in any society provide the substance of civil society, are also largely segregated on religious grounds. It is hardly surprising that efforts to resolve the Northern Ireland conflict have fallen on the rock of these reinforcing, fundamental societal divisions. To be sure, other societies possess a range of social divisions which reinforce political identity. But few, if any, have the range of reinforcing social divisions that Northern Ireland possesses, and most have a series of competing groups, none of which constitutes a majority. The majoritarian position of the Protestant community has been a fundamental block to political compromise with the Catholic minority.

The 1998 Northern Ireland Agreement, the Referendums and Assembly elections, may collectively represent an advance for Northern Ireland. On the positive side, the paramilitary organisations have been involved in the Agreement for the first time, a fundamental deficiency of previous attempts to resolve the conflict. Moreover, there is substantial evidence that the IRA and their Protestant counterparts have reassessed their military situation and may be prepared to use political methods to try and attain their goals. The Agreement

also represents the positive efforts of many other bodies to try and resolve the conflict, most notably the British and Irish governments, and the ***Clinton*** administration in the United States, all of whom have put pressure on the various groups they are close to in Northern Ireland.

The major problems with the Agreement are twofold. First, it is necessarily an elite accommodation, a consociational agreement common in many European countries. So far as elites retain the confidence of their supporters, elite agreements remain an effective means of resolving political conflict. However, the history of the Protestant community is that political elites who are prepared to compromise on fundamental constitutional issues loose the consensual support of their community. The deep division among Protestants over the referendum is evidence of the potential that exists for moderate Protestant leaders to loose their support. The second problem is that the Agreement does not deal with the basic problems that feed the conflict: the social divisions that reinforce sectarianism and the ambiguity towards the use of physical force for political ends. The new political arrangements will only be able to create genuine cross-community institutions if they exist long enough to establish the confidence of both communities. Many hope that it will achieve that goal, but the weight of history points in the other direction.

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